

# The AI-Augmented Leader

## 8 Leadership Performance Trends for 2026



Business Leader Global Trends Report

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26

# Foreword

For leaders in 2026, the real challenge isn't using AI, it's using it in a way that strengthens good judgement, augments tasks, sharpens decisions & lifts performance without losing what makes them effective in the first place.

Technology won't compensate for weak leadership fundamentals. It will only amplify them.

Sustained disruption over many years has also left many leaders change fatigued. That's why high performers in 2026 are **getting back to fundamentals**: a clear vision & goals, strong people, solid strategy, capability mastery & an operating rhythm that keeps everyone accountable.

This next leadership phase is about **Human + AI**, using technology to extend capability, not replace acumen, intuition, or emotional intelligence. Leaders who excel will:

- Use **AI to strengthen judgment** & strategic clarity.
- Build **psychological endurance** & a reliable **leadership operating cadence**.
- Increase impact through **mastery of core leadership capabilities** & improved **strategic productivity**.
- **Achieve strong growth & profit** by getting things done, connecting the dots & leveraging their **trusted reputation**.

We trust these **eight leadership performance trends** give you the clarity & confidence to shape your own success in 2026.



  
**James Mason**

Managing Director - Mindshop

## 8 Leadership Performance Trends 2026



### AI Integration & Augmentation

AI literacy alone won't differentiate leaders in 2026; using AI to augment judgement, tasks, accelerate decisions & elevate insight will.



### Relearning Core Leadership Skills

The next era belongs to those who unlearn outdated behaviours, relearn proven leadership & strategy fundamentals.



### Psychological Endurance

Sustained high performance depends less on speed & more on psychological endurance, the ability to operate under prolonged pressure without eroding judgement or execution.



### Strategic Productivity Mastery

Strategic productivity as a leader focuses on increasing the value, quality & strategic relevance of what you do while reducing the time, stress & inputs required.



### Leadership Operating Cadence

Leadership effectiveness is driven by a consistent yet adaptive operating cadence to what you do day-to-day.



### Reputation Intelligence

A leader's reputation or personal brand is now a strategic asset that shapes trust, influence & the speed at which teams & stakeholders back their decisions.



### The Connector-in-Chief

Blends curiosity, intuition, acumen, diverse networks, sharp listening & disciplined experimentation to uncover insights others overlook.



### Strategic Performance

AI-augmented leaders don't just generate insight they convert it into execution that accelerates growth, profitability & strategic momentum.



# AI Integration & Augmentation

**AI literacy alone won't help differentiate leaders in 2026; using AI to augment judgement, tasks, accelerate decisions & elevate insight will.**

As the AI hype settles in 2026 the shift is now from experimentation with AI tools to redesigning habits, tasks, workflows, policies & decision systems so AI measurably improves outcomes. The most effective leaders won't chase full automation; they'll integrate AI at the right depth where they amplify insight without overwhelming it.

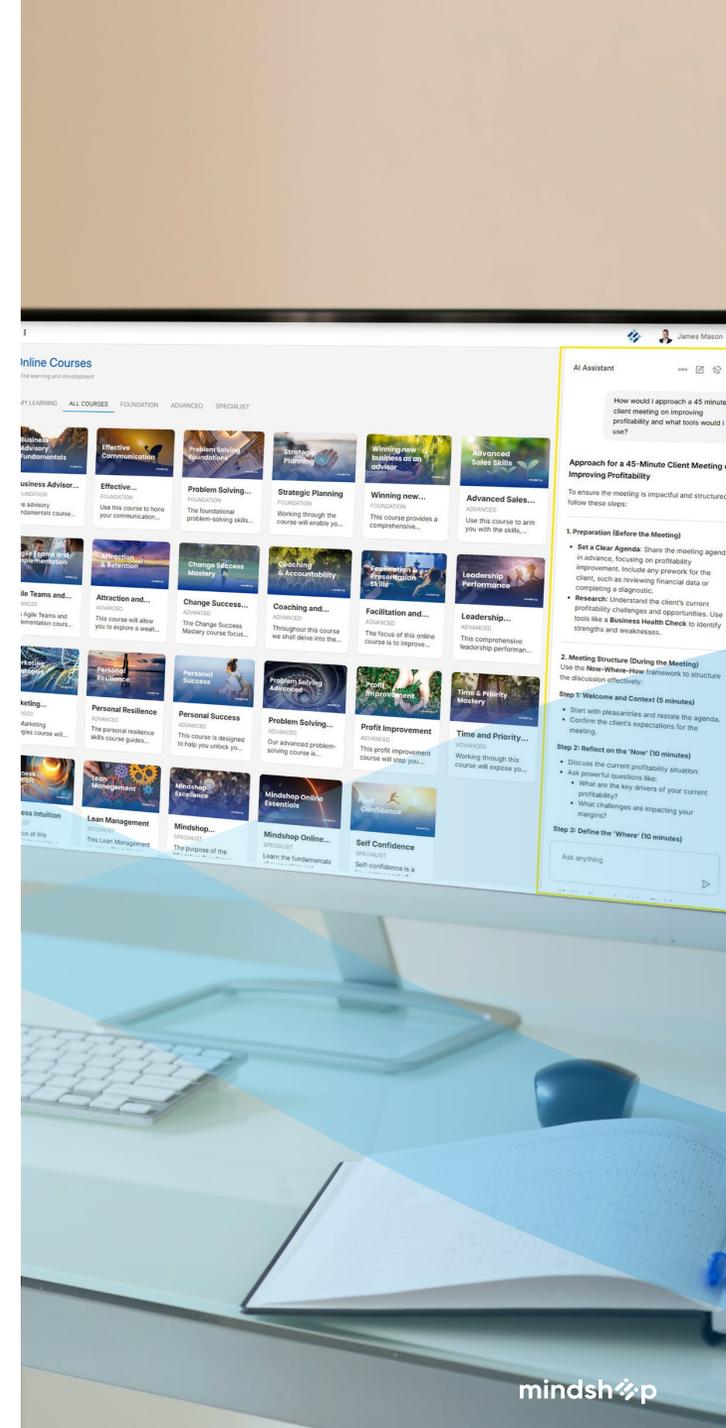
“**Focus on doing something better. Not something shiner.**”

**Tom Goodwin**

Author | Keynote Speaker | Trainer | 4 x LinkedIn #1 Voice in Marketing

## 5 Key Performance Insights

- 1. Develop a focused AI strategy with strong governance.**  
Setup an AI expert group to define priorities, projects, guardrails, & steer impact.
- 2. Use AI as 'middle-to-middle' augmentation,** not end-to-end automation.  
Feed quality inputs, stress-test outputs for quality & authentic human judgement.
- 3. Protect trust** by ensuring your AI output as a leader solves a problem, is authentic, is digestible & contextual to the issue. Avoid AI use leading to 'lazy' thinking & ideas.
- 4. Redesign workflows & tasks to find high-leverage augmentation opportunities.**  
Embrace minimum viable product experiments to quickly validate value.
- 5. Build internal AI factories that capture & scale organisational know-how.**  
Create or harness clever AI agents that reflect your processes, standards & best practices that you & your team can harness across all areas of the business.





# Relearning Core Leadership Skills

The past five years of turbulence revealed a hard truth that many leaders still rely on muscle memory built for a world that's changed.

The next era belongs to those who unlearn outdated behaviours, relearn proven leadership & strategy fundamentals in a modern context & who embrace AI literacy as a new core capability. Leadership advantage will come not from knowing more, but from being more adaptable to your environment.

**“ We don't need a wealth of new capabilities as leaders; we need to master the fundamentals in a modern context. ”**

**James Mason**  
Managing Director | Mindshop

## 5 Key Performance Insights

- 1. Build a quarterly unlearn, relearn cycle.** Identify key leadership capability areas to evolve for maximum impact in 2026.
- 2. Revisit key skill areas:** communication, strategy, implementation, coaching, change & how they can be augmented with AI.
- 3. Learn through doing.** Time poor leaders should avoid learning 'theories' & instead seek to apply new learning immediately into their day-to-day roles to boost learning retention levels.
- 4. Embrace a 'contrarian' mindset** where you challenge assumptions, explore scenarios & bring curiosity to problems.
- 5. Use AI as your sharpest learning challenger.** Stress test thinking, reveal blind spots & strengthen strategic options.

## 2030 Leadership Capabilities



### About the 2030 Leadership Capability Model

1. Identify where you have capability gaps or need to re-learn capabilities in a modern context.
2. Engage 3<sup>rd</sup> party providers to help build blended learning programs (coaching, workshops, online learning) that help you learn through doing.



# Psychological Endurance

**Sustained high performance in 2026 depends less on speed & more on psychological endurance**, the ability to operate under prolonged pressure without eroding judgement or execution.

Leaders are recognising that resilience, health, life-balance & self-awareness aren't 'wellbeing extras', but critical performance foundations for themselves & their teams.



**Is what I'm doing helping or harming me?**

**Dr Lucy Hone**

International Resilience Researcher & Best-Selling Author

## 5 Key Performance Insights

- 1. Work smarter, not harder.** Drive strategic productivity. Prioritise leverage, not volume, to conserve energy. Identify & embrace best practice from your peers.
- 2. Identify & mitigate self-sabotaging behaviours & beliefs.** Spot behaviours & beliefs that drain momentum & replace them early. Explore Positive Intelligence (PQ) to identify saboteur traits holding you back.
- 3. Protect cognitive bandwidth** through disciplined downtime & reductions in context switching each day.
- 4. Curate balanced networks** of quality leaders & avoid disproportionate levels of energy vampires around you.
- 5. Build mental safety margins for decision resilience.** Avoid pushing to the redline for peak performance. Plan regular breaks & holidays.





# Strategic Productivity Mastery

**AI-augmented leaders know productivity isn't about doing more it's about elevating the value of what gets done.**

Strategic productivity focuses on increasing the value, quality, & strategic relevance of what you do while reducing the time, stress, & inputs (through better leverage) required to achieve it. The real question isn't 'How do I get through the workload?' but 'How do I do less & achieve more through better leverage?'



**Leverage is about understanding where you can do less & achieve more.**

**Dr Chris Mason**  
Founder | Mindshop

## 5 Key Performance Insights

- 1. Focus on where you can add the greatest value as a leader.**  
What are the 20% of things you do that add 80% of your impact?
- 2. Consistently under-promise & over-deliver.**  
Manage the expectations of your team & customers to build trust & momentum. Be present & lead by example.
- 3. Delegate effectively & automate low-value tasks.**  
Free up capacity for deeper thinking & higher-impact execution.
- 4. Use AI to accelerate speed, clarity & decision quality.**  
Let AI lift the execution load so you can think further ahead.
- 5. Develop actions to improve across all six levers of strategic productivity.** This will strengthen focus, systems, habits, delegation, automation & cadence.

## Strategic Productivity Model

**(Value X Quality X Strategic Relevance)**

**(Time X Leverage X Effort / Stress)**

### About the Strategic Productivity Model

To thrive, not just survive, leaders must shift their thinking. Productivity can no longer be measured solely by hours worked or tasks completed. Instead, it must be reframed as **strategic productivity**: a sustainable, high-performance model that balances effort with effectiveness, output with wellbeing & value creation with operational resilience.

Each component of this equation holds critical insight into how leaders can boost their performance sustainably, without tipping into fragility or fatigue.



# Leadership Operating Cadence

In 2026, leadership effectiveness is driven by a consistent yet adaptive operating cadence. This involves a rhythm that keeps strategy, execution & performance tightly aligned while allowing rapid adjustments when conditions shift.

**Leaders who excel build disciplined review cycles, make fast evidence-based pivots & maintain strong control over time & priorities.**

“ **The pessimist complains about the wind. The optimist expects it to change. The leader adjusts the sails.** ”

**John C. Maxwell**

#1 New York Times Best-Selling Author & Leadership Expert

## 5 Key Performance Insights

1. **Build a high-performance cadence** of check-ins on strategy, projects, KPI's, team performance on a daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly & annual basis.
2. **Run agile implementation loops across teams.** This ensures a consistent focus on implementation, the ability to pivot as required & regular removal of barriers to change.
3. **Use dashboards to track execution & learning in real time.** Visibility enables faster pivots & clearer accountability.
4. **Master time & priority habits especially time-boxing.** This builds trust around your personal brand as somebody who gets things done.
5. **Communicate effectively & predictably** to maintain trust across your team. Coach & develop your team.





# Reputation Intelligence

**A leader's reputation or personal brand is now a strategic asset that shapes trust, influence, & the speed at which teams & stakeholders back their decisions.**

Reputation Intelligence is about understanding how others see you, then harnessing your strengths & flexing other elements of your personal brand (while staying authentic) to drive stronger business performance. **The new credibility test is: Does how you show up consistently match what you claim to stand for?**

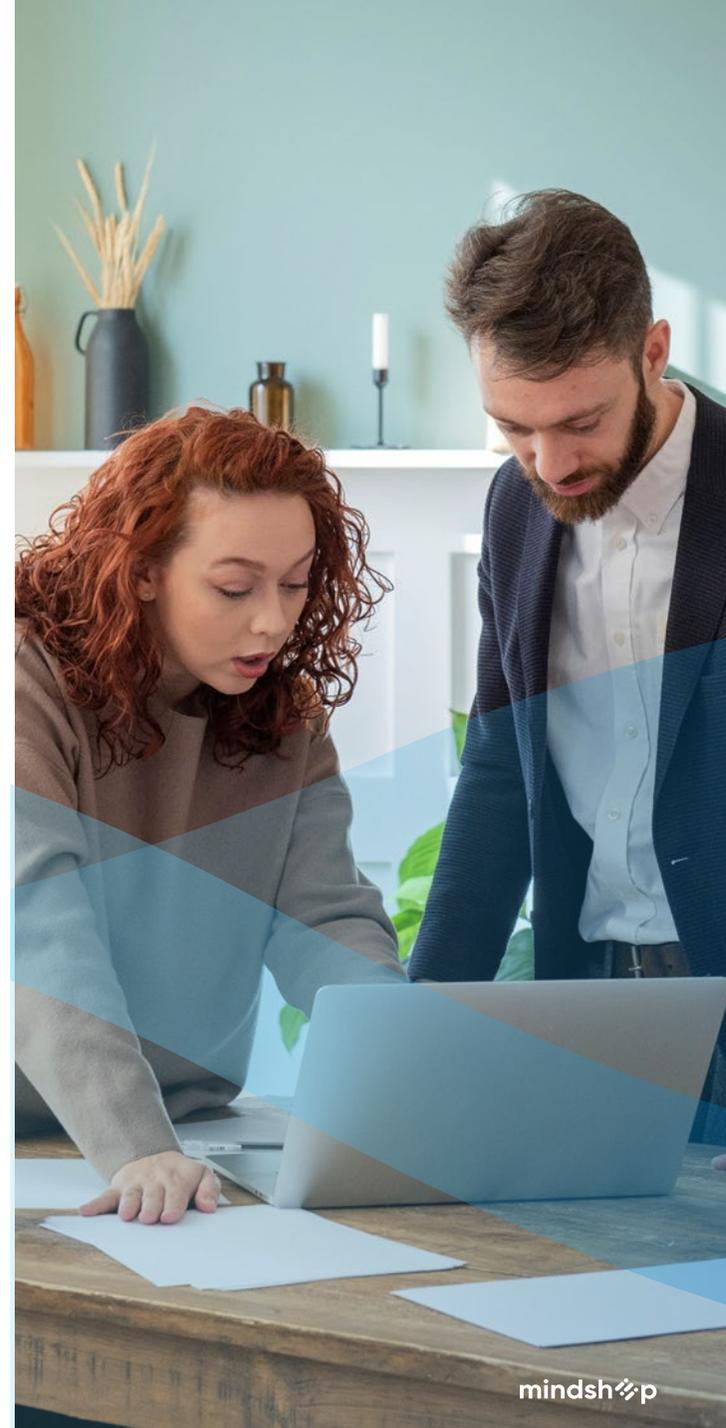
“**Your performance will get you in the door, but your personal brand will keep you there.**”

**Carla Harris**

Morgan Stanley Vice Chair & leadership expert

## 5 Key Performance Insights

- 1. Audit your reputation through trusted feedback.** Compare external perception with your intended leadership brand. Where are your gaps to work on?
- 2. Embrace challenging projects or opportunities** aligned to your desired personal brand that allow you to build & demonstrate capability.
- 3. Publish authentic, contrarian insights to build authority.**
- 4. Treat any imposter syndrome feelings as evidence of growth.** Use them as cues you're expanding your capability, not failing.
- 5. Lead with authentic strength: transparent, human, & credible.** Show vulnerability & conviction in equal measure to build trust.





# The Connector-in-Chief

In a world overflowing with data & ideas the real competitive edge comes from connecting dots faster & in more innovative ways than anyone else. **Leaders who embrace being a ‘Connector-in-Chief’ blend curiosity, acumen, diverse networks, powerful questions & disciplined experimentation to uncover insights others overlook.**

They draw from outside their industry, read widely & use AI to detect patterns & dig deeper into insights to join the dots for higher performance. Their value isn't just what they know, it's how they connect the dots around them for insights & strategies.

“ **Curiosity is a key competitive advantage for high performing leaders.**

**James Mason**  
Managing Director | Mindshop

## 5 Key Performance Insights

- 1. Read & watch diverse, contrarian perspectives.**  
Invest dedicated time each day to stay relevant.
- 2. Build high-quality networks inside & beyond your industry.**  
Break echo chambers to develop quality ideas, new innovations & strategies.
- 3. Use AI to accelerate research & pattern recognition.**  
Harness & then interpret into the appropriate context. Ask powerful questions.
- 4. Experiment frequently & pivot quickly.**  
Be prepared to fail fast & adapt as required. Watch for change fatigue.
- 5. Stay customer-centric when connecting the dots.**  
Use a powerful combination of intuition, quality data & customer feedback to shape innovations. Stay focused on fixing genuine problems for customers.





# Strategic Performance

Strategic performance is the natural outcome of mastering the seven preceding trends. **Successful AI-augmented leaders don't just generate insight & ideas they convert it into execution that accelerates growth, profitability & strategic momentum across their businesses.**

They connect dots quickly, calibrate when to push harder or ease off & align teams when implementing change around their vision & strategies. Their performance edge comes from disciplined focus, consistent follow-through & the ability to simplify complexity.



**Ideas are easy. Execution is everything.**

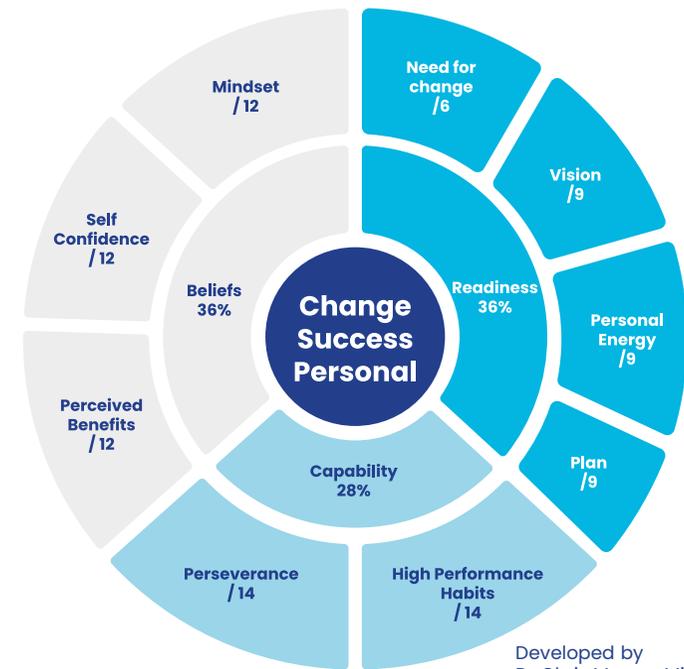
**John Doerr**

Author, Investor & Venture Capitalist

## 5 Key Performance Insights

- 1. Build a one-page performance plan for 2026.**  
Ensure it has a clear 'Now, Where & How' & is shared with your advisor to assist with implementation.
- 2. Close the capability gaps blocking higher performance.**  
Prioritise skill shifts that unlock measurable improvement.
- 3. Strengthen your probability of personal change success.**  
Understand your gaps relating to 'Readiness, Capability & Beliefs' based on the change you want in 2026.
- 4. Coach your team for alignment & quickly but strategically remove barriers.** Ensure your people have clear direction.
- 5. Lead by example.** Be consistent & reliable to build trust.

## Change Success Personal



Developed by  
Dr Chris Mason, Mindshop

### About the Change Success Personal Model

Your probability of personal change success is made up of three key components:

- **Readiness 36%** - How ready you are to implement change.
- **Beliefs 36%** - Your overall attitude in relation to the change.
- **Capability 28%** - Skills needed to implement change.

Rate yourself out of the sub-component scores to see where you have your biggest gaps. You should be aiming for a score above 75% to have a high probability of personal change success as a leader.

# AI-Augmented Leaders of the Future

AI-augmented leaders of the future will leverage globally-connected AI tools, internal AI agents & their own business acumen to operate with greater insight & speed. They will channel these insights through mastery across three key capability areas:

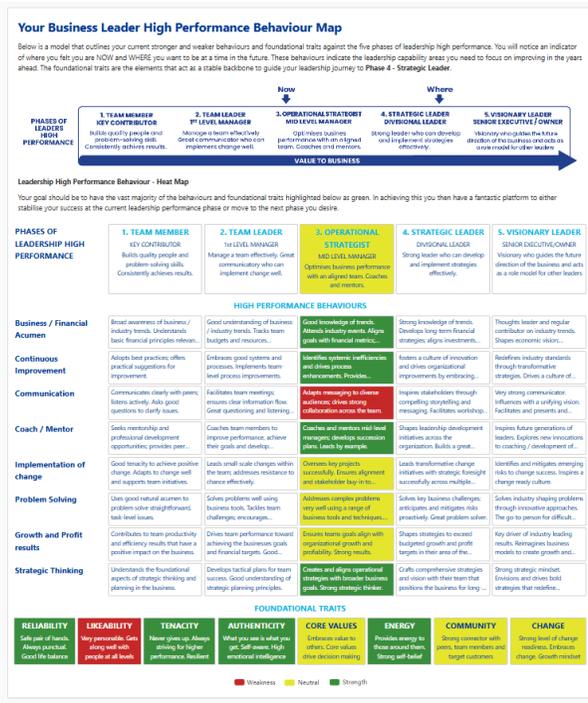
- Communication & emotional intelligence (EQ) skills,
- Change & implementation skills, &
- Strategy & decision-making skills.

This powerful blend of human skills & AI will equip leaders to deliver outcomes in their roles far faster & smarter, driving materially higher performance across their businesses now & into the future.



# Your Journey to Becoming a High-Performing Business Leader in 2026.

Take the Mindshop Business Leader Performance Diagnostic to get a tailored **Leadership Performance Roadmap & One Page Plan** for success in 2026 & beyond. Discover your leadership performance & capability gaps.



Extract of an example diagnostic results report.

**Complete Diagnostic**

## 3 Step Implementation Plan: Turn Insights Into Action

**Step 1 Review the 8 trends & rate your level of strength in each out of 10.**  
With 1 being very low & 10 being very high.

**Step 2 For the three lowest scores determine 2-3 key actions** you can take that draw on some of the key performance insights to improve your score.

**Step 3 Develop a One Page Plan** by combining these insights those from your diagnostic to drive the change needed for greater success in 2026. Talk to your advisor for assistance & guidance.

**For support contact your Mindshop advisor.**

Founded in 1994 in Melbourne, Australia by Dr Chris Mason, Mindshop is the leading business advisory solution powering thousands of accounting firms, consultants, & coaches worldwide.

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If you want to discuss this or other business challenges and opportunities, contact our experienced business advisors to discuss your specific needs today.

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